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Expert Discusses Text Messaging in Political Campaigns

USINFO Webchat transcript, November 19

Matt Bieber of Mobile Commons, a firm whose software allows organizations to create and manage their own mobile messaging campaigns, discussed text messaging and other techniques to reach voters during a November 19 webchat.

Following is the transcript:

(begin transcript)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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USINFO Webchat Transcript

Elections 2008: Getting Out the Vote: Text Messages and Political Campaigns

Guest: Matt Bieber
Date: November 19, 2007
Time: 9:00 a.m. EST (1400 GMT)

Moderator: Welcome to today's webchat! We will begin at 09:00 EST 14:00 GMT.

Moderator: To those of you just joining our webchat, welcome! We see your questions coming in from around the world.

Matt Bieber: Hello everyone! This is Matt from Mobile Commons. I'm looking forward to your questions.

Moderator: Dear participants, if you have more than one question please submit each one separately. Thank you!

Question [stuart]: In Algeria we still use paper ballots. This discussion is very interesting. My question is do you think technology in voting will come to Algeria?

Answer [Matt Bieber]: Good question! In America, we do use some electronic voting machines, but there are many people who would prefer to continue using paper ballots. (With paper ballots, there is a record of how each person voted, so if there is ever any debate over how many votes were cast for each candidate, there is a way to go back and check. It makes some Americans nervous to think

that if they vote electronically, someone could tamper with their vote and there'd be no way to prove that they voted otherwise.)

Q [tisseem]: Hi, we are two students from Oran in Algeria. We are happy to join this web chat. Could you tell me about the political campaigns and what kind of media techniques are used to attract people especially young voters. What is the reason according to you that this kind of technique is used?

A [Matt Bieber]: During the last few election cycles, we have seen an explosion of new media techniques in elections. You probably know about social networking sites, for example. (In America, Facebook and MySpace are very popular.) Individual citizens are now also uploading video to YouTube to express their feelings about the candidates. Internet fundraising widgets are allowing anyone to raise money for their candidate.

And of course, text messaging is becoming more and more popular as a way for candidates to communicate with voters ("Hey, I'm going to be in your town tomorrow at noon. Come out to the rally in the park!") and to solicit feedback from voters. In general, these techniques are allowing more people to participate in campaigns – to express their views and their support (or opposition) to one candidate or another. It's a big change from the campaigns of the past, when the campaigns were very "top-down."

Q [DJAZIA]: HELLO, I am an Algerian student from Oran. My name is Djazia I am 17 years old and I am so happy to join this web chat because it will inform me more about your political campaigns. First I would like to ask you what did you study? did you study in the USA?

A [Matt Bieber]: Hello! I studied philosophy at a university in New Jersey here in the U.S. But getting involved in campaigns usually doesn't require any particular degree from any particular place. It's very merit-based and action-oriented – if you show up, are willing to do the less glamorous work first (and do a good job), you'll easily find work in campaigns.

Q [stuart]: When did you have your first computer classes in school? Because where I live in Algeria, we don't have classes to teach how to use computers, and do you want to have company here in Algeria one day?

A [Matt Bieber]: I think I had my first computer class in middle school (so when I was about 12 or 13). And yes, we would love to work in Algeria one day. In fact, we may end up running programs in Algeria long before we have an office there. (After all, our software is web-based, so you can operate it from anywhere.)

Q [ARC Nairobi]: hi matt, what made you start up this firm?

A [Matt Bieber]: Hi there! My boss, Jed Alpert, started the company after working in entertaining marketing. He had developed some mobile applications for Britney Spears when he realized that political organizations and nonprofits could easily put text messaging to use in order to communicate with their supporters.

Q [boudjira toufik]: Hello I'm TOUFIK BOUDJIRA from Algeria "Oran", a student at SIBWAIH School. I want to ask this question: could you tell me more about one especially interesting experience in your job?

A [Matt Bieber]: This is an especially interesting aspect of my job – talking to people from around the world (and hopefully, getting to travel to meet some of the people I talk to) about ways that technology can expand participation in politics!

Q [Chems]: Hi, we are two access students (schemseddine@hotmail.com and karim_2007_31@hotmail.fr) from Algeria. My question is could you tell more about your mobile community, do you have other companies in the U.S or in foreign countries?

A [Matt Bieber]: We work with lots of partner companies in other countries, but our own company is currently based in the U.S. What we're hoping to do, though, is build communities of people around the world who are interested in learning about and using text messaging in politics.

Q [laidoudrachid]: Hi. I'm LAIDOUD RACHID from Algeria (Oran), I student in Sibawaih School. I want to ask you a question: can you tell me how you became interested in politics?

A [Matt Bieber]: I have always been fascinated with politics – it's the space where people come together to decide how they're going to live, how their communities are going to look, what their (and their children's) opportunities will be. It's the place where we take on our big challenges and make some of our most frightening – but important – decisions.

Q [tissem]: Can I know more information about your profession? Could you tell me why did you leave congressional campaign in Pennsylvania?

A [Matt Bieber]: Sure! Well, I left the congressional campaign because we lost the election and I needed a new job! Now, I'm working in a slightly different part

of the electoral world – rather than trying to elect a candidate directly, I try to encourage campaigns to use text messaging technology to communicate with their voters.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: do you think that text messages are an effective way of political campaigns in regards to destroying other opponents reputations?

A [Matt Bieber]: We hope that candidates don't use text messages to destroy one another's reputation. It's possible that campaigns will use text messages to attack each other in a mean-spirited way, but we hope that they're used more for encouraging people to fight for and organize around the causes they care about.

Q [DIAZIA]: would you tell me when did you become the director of mobile community for mobile commons?

A [Matt Bieber]: I have been working at Mobile Commons for about a year now.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: can viruses be sent via text to cell phone users in the name of political campaigns?

A [Matt Bieber]: That is a great question. I honestly don't know whether that is technologically possible, though I do know that I have never heard of such a thing.

Q [yasmine rebiai]: Hello I'm YASMINE REBIAI FROM Oran Algeria. I study the English language at SIBAWAIH SCHOOL. I'm happy to participate today in this webchat and I have a question for you: could you tell me how you began Mobile Commons?

A [Matt Bieber]: Well, I didn't start the company – my boss did. His name is Jed Alpert, and before he started the company, he was running mobile programs for Britney Spears. Then he realized that it would be very useful to create technology that would allow politicians and non-profit organizations to run their own text messaging campaigns.

Q [hayet]: We are two access students from Oran ALGERIA. We would like to ask you two questions: 1/what is the purpose of the political campaigns? 2/Is there a legal age to be a politician?If you want to come to ORAN "algeria" I "soumia" WILL be pleasure to invite you to my family home

A [Matt Bieber]: The purpose of a political campaign is to elect a candidate to office. That office can be a legislative office (like Congress), an executive office (like governor or president), or even a judicial office (like judge).

The age requirements vary depending on which office you're running for, and at which level - local, state, or national. (And some offices don't have any minimum age requirements.) To serve in our Congress, for example, you have to be 25 years old. To serve as president, you have to be 35.

Q [Kenya]: In Kenya, the latest in politics is about the fracas on the primaries. We had ballot papers running out encouraging alot of rigging and irregulaties. How can we phase out this paper era in Kenya and if it is possible to vote electronically how long will it take for Kenya to embrace it?

A [Matt Bieber]: To be honest, I'm not entirely sure that electronic voting is the answer just yet. There is a lot of controversy around electronic voting machines in the U.S., because investigations have shown that every single type of machine can be hacked and tampered with.

For this reason, many Americans are working to ensure that there is a "paper trail," so that if there are any irregularities or concerns about election fraud, election officials will have the original paper ballots to look at.

Moderator: To those of you just joining us, welcome! Matt is working very hard to answer as many of your questions as possible.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: Hi. This is Rahma from Nairobi. How can women voters use this technology best? I guess it's easier than campaigning all day.

A [Matt Bieber]: Hi Rahma. Through a text-messaging campaign, women can organize themselves around women's issues (or any other issues). They can use text messaging to organize events, rallies, and other kinds of activism.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: Matt, do you consider yourself successful. If yes, why?

A [Matt Bieber]: To be honest, I don't really think about myself in that way. I hope to contribute to good causes and to be happy, and if those things are happening, I feel pretty good.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: where do you see this in the next one year?

A [Matt Bieber]: Great question. It's always difficult to predict, but we think there's going to be more use of picture and video messaging for political

purposes in the next couple of years. And more people will have internet-enabled phones, so campaigns may well find lots of new ways to interact with supporters. (Campaigns might ask people to record video at a rally and then upload it directly from their phones to the campaign's website, for example.) And campaigns will continue to use text messaging to gather supporters' feedback, and to display that feedback on websites, blogs, and big screens at live events.

Moderator: Dear participants, if you would like to introduce yourself to the group, please select the "comment" option.

Comment [ARC Nairobi]: In that Matt, you are successful. I believe success is pegged on the impact that you have or create with or in what you do.

Keep up the good work.

Wayush

Q [ARC Nairobi]: Hello Matt, I am Rachel in Nairobi Kenya and was wondering on whether you truly believe that text messages are an effective way as they tend to benefit others in regards to financial gain as In Kenya it's a booming Business as we are heading for elections and fail to meet the initial objectives of their campaigns.

A [Matt Bieber]: Hi Rachel. As with every new technology, there will be some things that work and others that don't, and to be honest, some of that can be difficult to predict. However, our experience tells that us that when text messaging is used as part of a smart, well-thought-out outreach campaign, it can be very effective at rallying supporters to take action on behalf of a campaign. We've found that text messages are most effective when they ask supporters to DO something (attend a rally, donate money, call an elected official about an issue) in short, action-oriented language.

Comment [ARC Nairobi]: my name is Rahma. A student at the University of Nairobi. bravo Matt!

Q [adolatkal]: The election campaigns are mobilizing voters not only in the USA, in the years 2007-2008 there are some simultaneous elections in many countries at different levels. The people are voting in many countries for candidates, not knowing, how these nominees are digitally competent, they observe/evaluate/appreciate only their soft, linguistic and multicultural skills competence, which are very different in every country. Every day I can see on CCN efforts, progressing/regressing, new triggers, starting points for

interactions, even tricks of all American candidates, later reread and analyze the received CNN alerts and make some conclusions about the eternal question: "Who is who". I do not vote, but virtually I am involved too! In the real fast-paced technological environment there are always so many technical supporters in every political campaign, mushrooming ICT enabled services providers, faithful and loyal to the nominees. I think, that the technical support is very similar in many countries. Everywhere in the globe there are so many good educated ICT specialists with the globally recognized certificates! Then how different is the mobile messaging of every political candidate at any concrete campaign span, stage, what are his/her concrete steps for mobilizing concrete reference groups of voters?

A [Matt Bieber]: Candidates use mobile messaging for lots of different purposes. Some wish to target their voters by messaging them based on their location, political affiliation, or some other criteria. Others have used text messaging to raise money. Still others just wish to keep a general list of supporters informed about how things are going on the campaign, and what they can do to help.

Moderator: Matt continues to review your questions. Thank you for your patience. A number of you have asked "why don't I see my question?" We have all of your questions in the "inbox", Matt reviews the questions and answers them as quickly as he can.

There are now 109 questions in the inbox from around the world!... we hope you will understand that he will try to answer as many as he can during our scheduled time.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: SMS TEXTS ARE KIND OF IMPERSONAL. YET VOTERS WANT HUMAN CONTACT. THEY WANT CANDIDATES WHO CARE AND CAN EMPATHISE WITH THEIR PLIGHT. IT SEEMS THEREFORE THAT SMS'S ARE MERELY FOR MAKING APPOINTMENTS, ARE LIMITED CAMPAIGN TOOLS AND SHOULD BE FOLLOWED UP BY ACTUAL MEETINGS BETWEEN CANDIDATES AND POTENTIAL VOTERS AT POLITICAL RALLIES TO ENABLE VOTERS TO GAUGE THE GUY'S BEHAVIOUR/MANNERISMS FACE TO FACE. JENICHAR

A [Matt Bieber]: You make a good point, Jenichar. This is exactly what we tell our candidates and clients - text messaging should not be used by itself. Rather, it should be used to organize people in a way that encourages all kinds of participation in the political process - reminding people to attend a rally in their town, for example, or asking people what they think about an issue so that the candidate has a better sense of what his supporters are thinking. Text messaging

is used best when it's used to augment other forms of campaigning, not to replace them.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: Rahma here. What kind of words do you use on your msgs to make it less boring?

A [Matt Bieber]: Hi Rahma. Some of our clients try to abbreviate their words and use "text speak" to try to sound youthful, but generally, we find that just being informal and straightforward works really well. People are used to being "talked at" in campaign outreach, so just sounding like a normal person can be a big hit.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: Hi, Do you think that in another few years political candidates will switch to using the internet completely as a tool for their campaigns or there are other campaign tools that are better than the internet?

A [Matt Bieber]: Well, there are some things that the internet probably won't replace anytime soon. For example, people really value seeing the candidate speak in person, meeting the candidate, and watching the candidates debate one another on the same stage. But I do think the internet will continue to play a bigger and bigger role in the next few years.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: Your job seems to be at the peak during campaign periods what happens after the elections?

A [Matt Bieber]: We work with lots of other clients too, including nonprofit organizations and businesses. Plus, elections take place at lots of different times throughout the year. While congressional and presidential elections take place in November, for example, elections for local offices can take place in the springtime, depending on location.

Moderator: Dear participants, Matt is reviewing the questions and will try to answer at least one more before we conclude the chat. We hope you will understand that there were many questions coming in and he may not have had the chance to answer yours.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: Osaaji, ARC Nairobi: Would a candidate be dismissed from the US election if he/she crudely exploits the text message service, say, to destroy the character and integrity of his/her competitors?

A [Matt Bieber]: To be honest, candidates get away with lots of dirty behavior, so I imagine that would be true with text messaging as well. Since a text message is relatively short, though, I don't think it would be an effective way to try to

destroy someone else's character. And of course, we wouldn't encourage our clients to do this kind of thing.

Q [ARC Nairobi]: do you get paid for your services?

A [Matt Bieber]: Yes, we do charge for our services.

Q [adolatkal]: Hi, Matt! I am an ESP teacher from Central Asia. I wonder if fictions of Isaak Asimov, especially his "The Franchise" has contributed to your boss's ideas about creating/developing and providing so kind of ICT enabled services.

A [Matt Bieber]: Wow, good question. I don't think my boss has ever read that particular book, but I'll certainly ask him!

Q [ARC Nairobi]: hello Matt, Beatrice here, first time here and I love it. Is the older generation there more into mobile phones or landlines? I bet they are the most targeted audience by politians because few youngsters care about politics

A [Matt Bieber]: Hi Beatrice! Mobile phones are more popular among younger people, but they're becoming popular among every age group. (Believe it or not, the average age of a text-messenger in America is 30.) And as it turns out, politicians are particularly keen on communicating with young people via text messages and mobile phones for two reason: one, because young people tend not to have landlines, so there is no other good way to reach them, and two, because youth are underrepresented in the electorate (meaning that if politicians can convince youth to vote, there are lots of votes to be gained).

Matt Bieber: Thanks, everyone, for participating in this chat. Unfortunately, I've got to sign off, but it was great to speak with all of you!

Moderator: We wish to thank Matt Bieber for joining us today. The webchat is now closed. Please visit our [USINFO Webchat Station](#) homepage for more information on upcoming events and a transcript of today's discussion (usually posted within one business day).

(Guests are chosen for their expertise. The views expressed by guests are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State.)

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